



Like nowhere on Earth...

DJmag embarks on a journey of discovery at Burning Man — the most out-there festival on the planet



The Golden Gate Bridge is lit up with twinkling lights, a giant ghetto blaster glides by with people dancing on top, and from the darkness a pink and mauve grinning Cheshire cat emerges. Alice is probably here somewhere too. For we're in a Wonderland. Of sorts.

This is just a selection of the fantastical mutant artcars and buses cruising around Burning Man, the week-long arts and (increasingly so) music festival located in the Black Rock Desert, northwest Nevada. This is as extreme as it gets, a sensory overload where the surreal becomes the norm and where the weird and wonderful becomes a way of life amongst a community who turn their back on society's demands and expectations in a microcosmic paradise of freedom and expression.

Set on an ancient lakebed (the playa) guarded by majestic mountains, Burning Man is like a parallel universe. It's from another time and place, another

dimension. By day it's Mad Max under a scorching desert sun. As night falls and the temperature drops it's Close Encounters of The Third Kind meets Disneyland on acid scorched with Pagan undertones. It engulfs you in sense of fun and adventure, but for first-timers it also shakes you up, strips you down and touches your soul in a way never before experienced. It is, in a word, overwhelming.

Our story really begins just over a year before, in the back of a yellow cab crawling through New York one warm September day with Lee Burridge regaling glorious tales from his Burning Man experience a few days previous. We smile and nod and make all the right noises, but have already concluded that Burning Man isn't for us. Who wants to be stuck in the desert with loads of acid-fried hippies dancing around naked to psy-trance? In truth, it scares us. For there's no escape. No mobile signal. No hailing a fast cab home if we've had enough. It's as

extreme as the elements it's set in. By all accounts, fuck that.

Then, on 30th April this year, an unexpected email pops into our inbox. It's from Lee Coombs and asks simply, "How would you like to go to Burning Man this year?"

We hesitate for a second before typing "Absolutely!" and hitting send. Well, when push comes to shove...

Lee hooks us up with prominent San Francisco-based DJ and promoter Syd Gris, who throws the Bay Area's best parties under his Opel Productions banner. He also heads up the Opulent Temple, the largest sound stage at Burning Man. The logistics are worked out and we're good to go.

As the date approaches our excitement is tinged with anxiety and peppered with trepidation. Opinion amongst friends is split: some declare we'll love it, others consider it more of an endurance test. One particular individual who's already been 'burned' imparts the wisdom that it will change our lives forever. Which kinda



shits us up — we like our life just as it is. What the hell goes on out there?

Tuesday afternoon and our American Airlines flight takes off from Heathrow to Dallas, where we board a connection to Reno. Dubbed 'The Biggest Little City in the World', Reno is famous for its casinos — and little else — and we crash overnight in the El Dorado Casino & Hotel, awash with blinking and bleeping slot machines at every turn.

Bright and early on Wednesday morning we meet up with Syd's girlfriend Samantha and her friends Brenda and Naomi and set out on the final three-hour road trip to our destination. The girls explain the Burning Man 'moop' — matter out of place — principle. It's simple — the desert should be left the way it's found, clear of any rubbish, debris, cans, bottles or even cigarette butts. In other words, leave no trace. Sounds much more pleasant than the carpet of filth found at every UK festival. Signs of civilisation become scarce as the road stretches out in front of us. The surrounding land begins to look more threadbare before the last determined tufts of greenery vanish to reveal a carpet of alkaline dust.

We turn off the road and join a steady stream of motor homes and cars similarly weighed down with vital supplies. The only commodities that can be purchased at the festival are ice and coffee.

Otherwise, dollars are useless, Burning Man based on the criterion of giving, sharing and looking after each other — the complete opposite of the selfish attitude prevalent in the greed infused modern world.

"We've got a newbie," the girls inform the naked — bar boots and bandana — greeter



checking our tickets, a cheery old geezer with his dangly bits on display. Newbies either have to lie on the ground and make dust angels, bend over for a spanking or ring a heavy old bell. Or all three. We get off lightly.

"Welcome home," beams or cuddly greeter. We're going in...

Nine miles in circumference, around 50,000 people have been drawn to Burning Man this year, once again creating Black Rock City — the fourth largest city in the state during its temporary existence. Laid out in an arc, wide avenues are named after points on the clockface and the tall wooden Burning

Man effigy located at 6pm helps Burners navigate around the site. The inner arc is The Esplanade, where most of the action happens, and out in front is the playa proper. It's flat and vast and during the last Ice Age, almost 13,000 years ago, it was a lakebed, 500 feet under water at the bottom of Lake Lahotan.

We locate Syd's RV — home for the next four nights — in the Opulent Camp. Over six feet tall, Syd's friendly face is peppered with freckles, giving him an instantly likeable charm complemented by his calm composure. He and his core crew arrived six nights previous to set up camp and the Opulent Temple sound stage.

This year's Burning Man theme is 'the American Dream' and, apart from tonight's annual 'Sacred Dance', Syd and co. have christened their parties 'The Perils of Patriotism', 'The America Ahead — Dreams & Nightmares' and such like, in a bid to make people think about the political climate.

Originally a heavy metal and grunge fan, Syd got into dance music later in the game, in November 1998.

"I was 28 when I had my first proper clubbing experience," he recalls. "I was in the middle of graduate school and had just separated from my wife so I was pretty down. Two friends dragged me to a club that Spundae were throwing and, as





it was my first time clubbing, they gave me a pill.

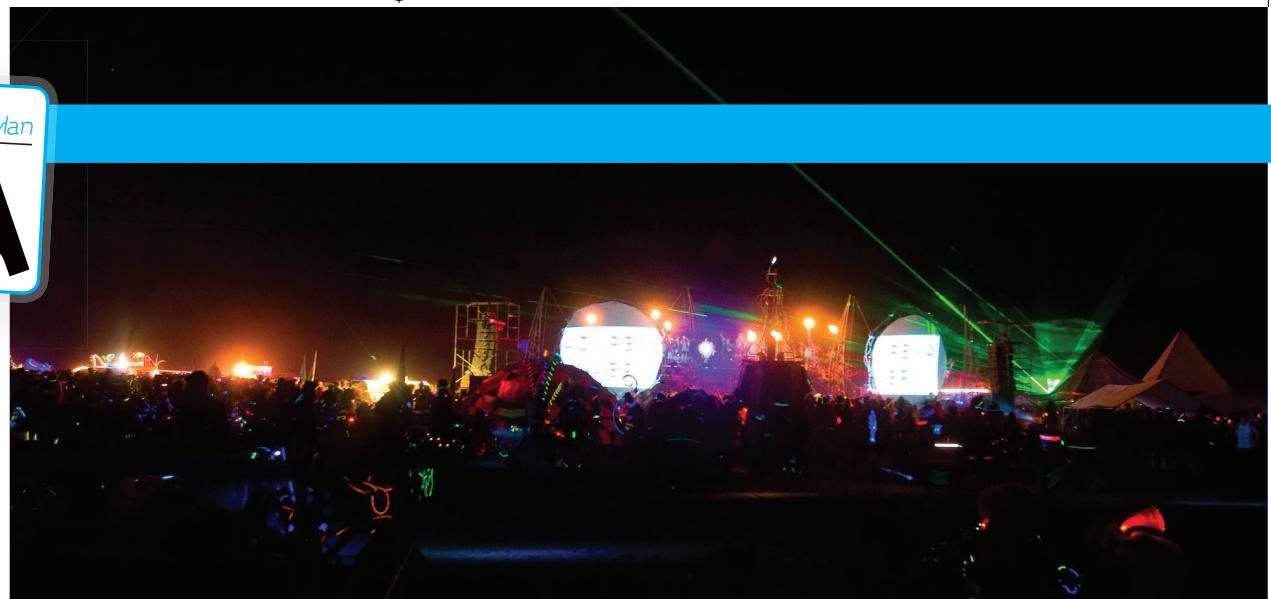
"It was a time when the progressive trance sound was king and, sure enough, two hours later I was in the middle of the dancefloor in love with the world. I was reminded that I would be happy again. "My friends say they created a monster," he chuckles, "because I was so into retouching with that experience and learning about electronic music, its genres and sub-genres."

His first Burning Man experience came three years later, in 2001, and was something of an epiphany.

"I camped with friends and was introduced to how these small tribes/communities — mostly Bay Area based — created these dance camps to do their thing," remembers Syd. "It was something of a transition period for Burning Man, when the sound camps were becoming a more prevalent experience. I was very inspired by the creativity."

Back home in San Fran, Syd began volunteering for the Radiance parties, which were connected to the Burning Man communities. Offering more than just music, the parties also included midnight ceremonies, guided meditation or some form of performance art. It appealed to Syd, who also began playing in their chillout room. But in a parallel process he was still having it large in the commercial club scene and initially cut his promoter's teeth by throwing several big benefit parties in association with Spundae. Ideally, he wanted to bring the two clubbing worlds together.

"What I saw in the commercial club scene



was the big name DJs, the big productions and the big crowds, and I wanted to guide that scene towards being good for the community," he explains.

By 2002 Syd had set up his own production company, Opel Productions, designed to be a fusion between the Burning Man scene and the commercial club scene. The next year he started Opulent Temple and in a joint venture hooked up with the Infinite Kaos tribe to bring a sound camp to Burning Man — the Opulent Temple of Kaos. Sandra Collins, Tipper and Josh Gabriel all played but Syd claims the Infinite Kaos crew lived up to their name so in 2004 he went out on a limb to create his own vision — the Opulent Temple of Venus. Hybrid, D:Fuse and Scumfrog tore it up and the Opulent Temple has since become the biggest sound camp on the playa showcasing a tight team of residents, friends and world-class DJ talent.

The Freaks Come Out

We set off across the playa on bicycles. It's the easiest way to get around — or should be — but winds have left a downy patchwork quilt of dust on the ground and cycling is hard work. We grind to a halt



and keel over sideways more than once. First we check out the set-up at the Opulent Temple. Made to withstand the fiercest dust storm, the DJ booth is an ornate pod decorated with intricate metal work. It's flanked either side by giant round screens suspended from similarly detailed metal columns. Viewed together as one piece — and with a little imagination — the set-up looks like a mutant insect, the screens its outstretched wings and the DJ pod its full round belly. Opposite is a raised platform skirted with rope for an elevated rave experience and we can't wait to see it all come to life later.

Peddling out to the Burning Man effigy, we cut across to the other side of the playa, swing a right past a massive vase of silver desert daisies and hit The Deep End, the day-time party equivalent to the Opulent Temple's night-time rave. A scene straight from the Wild West, it boasts a wooden saloon, casino-come-chillout area and giant water tower, dancing people dangling from it, naturally. The crowd is a mixture of flesh and colours — girls in bikinis; bare-chested blokes; six packs and tutus; hats, wigs and comedy shades and bright body paint; a girl observing the scene from the comfort of her motorised sofa with disco ball suspended overhead. As you do.



But it's at night that the freaks really come out. By 9pm numbers are swelling at the Opulent Temple's annual Sacred Dance party, amassing into a swirling ocean of outrageously colourful characters — dancing ketchup and mustard bottles, tinfoil robots, furry animals, a human torch, Indian squaws, day-glo cowboys, corset and French knicker-wearing saloon girls and Christ-knocks-what-else all lost in a sea of beats. Brit DJing brothers Ed and Tom Real fire out waves of wonky tech and electro largess, US star The Scumfrog drops filthy skuzzy house and mash-up manipulator Tim Healey blows the speakers apart with his trashed-out sound. Set in the middle of nowhere, the music is as cutting-edge as you'd find in any London club. OT





resident Vinkalman veers down a more progressive route and as DJ-controlled flames shoot out from the booth, lighting up the scene in a fierce orange glow, there's nowhere on earth we'd rather be right now. It's quite a party.

But what really strikes is that while Opel Productions is Syd's commercial venture, the Opulent Temple is a completely self-funded exercise. Everyone donates their time and expertise for free. No-one gets paid a penny, not even the DJs. The \$60K production costs are met through a series of fund-raisers held throughout the year. And sadly failing to recognise music as art, the Burning Man organisation offer no financial support. Hell, the OT crew and the DJs even have to buy their own tickets!

"I have nothing but admiration for the OT guys," says Lee Coombs when we bump into him. "They put in so much hard work to make this happen and it's really all for the love."

Of course, Syd is at pains to point out that he couldn't stage the Opulent Temple on his own.

"There's around 130 people in the camp and probably a core of about 30 people

who really make the camp happen," says Syd. "They're motivated by the same thing I was in the beginning, to rock Burning Man at the biggest sound camp. Others have offered to help after being touched by their previous experiences here, epic experiences at Opulent Temple that have completely changed their lives. I've had people emphatically say, 'Dude, you changed my life, You saved my marriage', 'You've renewed my faith and vigour' and that's why they help us."

Bass Pressure

After dancing until sunrise and following a few hours sleep we feel strangely refreshed. So we walk the few miles over to The Deep End where Syd is playing an electro classics set. But it takes longer, much longer, to get there than we reckoned and by the time we make it we've missed Syd. After an unsuccessful scout around to find him, we opt for the long walk back. Then just as Syd, Samantha and Brenda make it back to the RV we come over all faint. With our head between our knees, their concerned fussing leaves us mightily embarrassed. The desert has just whipped our ass.



outfits. In the distance you can see the artcars driving across the desert and when you look up there's a clear sky and the shape of mountains on either side. Awesome is the only word to describe it." We continue rocking through 'til Syd's sunrise set and beyond, caning it with Lee and American house jock DJ Dan. An annual visitor since his first trip three years ago, Burning Man and the Opulent Temple continue to strike a chord with Dan.

"I'm still blown away by how kind and generous everyone is, everyone looking out for each other and just showing an honest love for their fellow man," says Dan. "The amount of creativity that people put into their art, music and clothing is so inspiring. I haven't felt this much electricity in the air since the early rave days.

"The people here are of all ages and all walks of life but they're all here for the same reason — to inspire and be inspired, to give and receive love and to love and respect the land and each other. Every year it refuels my soul."

Special Magic

Friday night is the real biggie for Syd and his crew. DJ Dan is playing tonight along with Christopher Lawrence, with Carl Cox making his Burning Man debut at the Opulent Temple. Rubbing our eyes awake, it's well into the evening and the sound stage is unusually silent. There's a huge crowd gathering but no music. Fuck. Calmly (at least it seems), as the minutes stretch into hours, the sound engineers work out the cause of the problem and fix it. With the line-up reshuffled, DJ Dan makes up for lost time by slamming down some fucked-up twisted house as the crowd swells beyond imagination. Carl Cox on the bill has a magnetic impact. Around 5000 people have been drawn to the Opulent Temple and the fug of creative energy is all but crackling. Lasers dance in the sky as Coxy drops his first record. The invisible touchpaper has been lit and Carl





rocks it right out with fierce house and funk-fuelled techno, his grinning face and constant shoulder shrugging dance moves beamed onto the giant screens, cut-up with first-class visuals.

Tonight a special kind of magic cocoons Coxy and the crowd, who're hanging onto his every note. Locked in the here and now we realise that this is no ordinary Carl Cox set in no ordinary setting. Perhaps it's the collective process of a lifetime's memory being imprinted on everyone's mind simultaneously that adds to the intensity. Whatever it is, it's beyond special. And Carl Cox feels it too, grabbing a mic and vowing to return next year. After a nervous start to the night, Syd is now in his element.

"Carl playing was one of those moments when it all came together," he grins, "when you look around and you're pleased with your efforts and the results, in part because you know you're the steward of thousands of people's joy. You're doing all this stuff to create this space for these awesome things to happen — and then they actually happen."

But as well as party ringmaster, Syd also has another message to spread. Each night — just for a few brief minutes — he takes the mic in the DJ pod and encourages the crowd to be politically aware, even confessing: "I haven't been

that proud to be American over the past eight years.". With the States gripped in presidential election fever, Syd is pro change and believes that politics have a place in dance music.

"A lot of people don't want their parties and their politics to mix and I totally understand and respect that — but that's not my thing," says Syd. "The state of the world is such that we don't have that luxury to enjoy our parties without engaging in society. For me, who happens to be part of the dance community, doing my part means trying to mobilise that community to do good in the world. DJ sets, parties in San Francisco and Burning Man camps and promotion are all platforms to spread that message."

Flip The Script

Acutely aware that we've been a night-owl since our arrival, it's time to flip the script. So we hit the sack soon after Coxy's set pledging to embark on a daytime adventure come morning. With the temperature not yet too hot, the cloudless morning sky is the perfect canopy under which to have a lengthy mosey around. There's a pleasant wind but as a precaution we pop goggles on our head and tie a scarf around our neck, conscious of protecting our eyes, nose and mouth should the playa dust kick up.

The Esplanade, relatively deserted of people, is still an explosion of colour with weird, wacky and wonderful sights everywhere. Two huge wicker statues take our breath away, Spanky's wine bar elicits a titter, we're amazed to find a few earlybirds whizzing around the Black Rock City Roller Disco — more astounded that we've stumbled across a roller disco than that there are people on wheels — while the Vedges & Gimp Camp and Suck 'N' Fuck Saloon leave us scratching our head. An older couple with their butts hanging out bid us good morning as we're admiring a giant tree made from animal skulls, and a bloke cycles past towing a line of teddy bears in little trailers. A sunflower cycles past in the opposite direction, matching the yellow duck artcar that's parked up, just past the huge sneaker-wearing skeleton sitting behind an oversized desk. This morning's reality is like a flicker-book with something fantastic on each page.

Already punch-drunk on surreal sights and contemplating visiting the Porn & Eggs Camp for breakfast, we're distracted by two alien couples nonchalantly strolling along. You couldn't make this shit up. And then the penny drops. This place is like a huge funny farm for all kinds of exhibitionists. And yet life in this abstract and absurd community is more normal, more comforting, than in any other city because it's built simply on respect for each other.

We wander out onto the playa where spiraling vortexes of sand — known as 'ancestors' — dance in amongst all sorts of incredible art pieces and breath-taking sculptures and become immersed in contemplation at the Temple of Solace, Burning Man offering hedonism and soul-searching serenity in equal measure.





Back at camp, Ali B finds us plonked on a deckchair scribbling notes furiously and invites us to his nearby RV for lunch. With the wind picking up, we follow him inside. Parked facing The Esplanade, the huge windscreens of Ali's RV gives a widescreen cinematic view but outside the picture is becoming hazy and then — whiteout. A ferocious sandstorm has just unfurled right before our eyes with visibility reduced to a few metres. We've never experienced anything like it. Every now and then the curtain of sand parts to reveal people struggling against the elements, others rolling around with laughter at their predicament, some running open armed into the playa to be swallowed up whole. We laugh in astonishment as a pirate ship sails past and disappears from view a few seconds later.

"Yep, Burning Man is one of a kind," nods Ali. "Every four seconds you see something amazing and then four seconds later you see something else. It's near impossible to document. The only way to get a true understanding of what it's like is to experience it first-hand. "The desert is like a big blank canvas or the white walls of a gallery and for one week a year it gets filled to the brim with all sorts of crazy stuff — moving and stationary artwork, music, crazy vehicles, bikes, costumes and lots of fire."

Feel The Burn

Six — yes six — hours later and the sandstorm lifts as quickly as it descended, the wind dying down and dust settling in time for Saturday night's burning of the man ceremony. Proudly lit, all the artcars and artbuses form a wide circle near the base of the effigy with thousands of people emerging from all corners of the

site to form a huge congregation. Flames shoot out intermittently from tall sentry-like torches answered by flame-throwing artcars in a dramatic call-and-response performance that heightens the tension.

To a cacophony of whooping and cheering, the effigy's arms slowly rise up as a huge fireworks display explodes into a million shards of colour into the dark sky. Another explosion marks the start of the burn and the wooden structure is consumed by yellow flames.

We're shipping out just after sunrise so sleeping seems like cheating and we opt to push right through. Our desert endurance test has passed in the blink of an eye although, admittedly, we do feel like we've been turned upside down. Marine Parade label boss and genre-hopping punk Adam Freeland gives us a much needed energy jab for the homestraight, Syd follows-up with some on-point pounders and Josh Gabriel steers the still strong crowd down his new techno route.

Following a touch of psy-trance from Dylot of Deep Voices, we feel tears well up as OT camp crusader Cosmic Selector drops 808 State's 'Pacific State' as the sun breaks over the horizon heralding a new day, a beautiful track for a beautiful moment.

Everything seems perfect — apart from the question mark hanging over the Opulent Temple's return next year, Syd and his crew despairing at the lack of support from festival organisers.

"Part of it depends on Burning Man and if they are gonna see, even just a little bit, the way we see things — that music is art," says Syd.

"The other part is talent based. If Carl Cox

wants to come back next year, which he's already saying, it would be really hard to say, 'Sorry'. And if Armin Van Buuren tells me he's gonna come to my camp, then it's a guarantee that I'll do the camp, just to see Armin blow it apart — that would be something."

We're almost asleep on our feet by the time we climb into a waiting car to take us back to the airport at Reno. Carl Cox is in the front passenger seat, also obviously affected by the past few days.

"This isn't a festival, it's a gathering of people who're here to find out about themselves, be who they want to be and feel completely free," says Carl. "I've never experienced anything like it. The amount of creativity and spirit is just unusual and there's a real sense of community amongst people who don't even know each other.

"The Opulent Temple guys are a great bunch of people and the way they create the Opulent Temple is amazing. I want to do whatever I can to help them. Music is art and it's important that is recognised."

Driving through the Burning Man site, we're kinda sad to be heading back on the road to normality, to a frantic world of deadlines and schedules.

"What's even more amazing is that soon all this will be gone," says Coxy. "Gone without a trace."

Which may be so... but the magic will remain. **LESLEY WRIGHT**



DUST BROTHERS

More desert discoveries...

- The Burning Man festival was started on Baker Beach, in San Fran, by Jerry James and Larry Harvey after they burned down a man built out of wood in 1986.

- There are no rules; each person decides how they would like to contribute to the community in their own way.

- Clothing is optional.

- Baby wipes become your very best friend during your desert stay.

- Artwork at the festival is anonymous and very often destroyed at the end of the week.

- OT core crew Syd Gris, Rich Martin, Vinkalman, Dutch, Cos, Jason Teplitsky, Dex Stakker, Drew Drop, Greg Biggs, Liz and Billy and DJ Icon, we salute you.

- For more info on Syd's projects check out opulenttemple.org and opelproductions.com

